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Zaire: Background to the Struggle

When the Congo became independent in 1960, the country had no national political institutions, no national leadership, and very few people with experience in running either the government or the economy. Independence was followed by an army mutiny, debilitating political infighting, fragmentation of the country along ethnic lines, and several regional secessions--the most important of which involved Katanga, now Shaba. Although the uprisings were largely suppressed by late 1965, the competition for political primacy between the forces of President Kasavubu and Moise Tshombe brought the government to a standstill.

In November 1965, then Lieutenant General Joseph Mobutu seized control, dismissed Kasavubu and installed himself as President. With the support of the military and selected civilian political allies, Mobutu replaced the disorganized parliamentary system with centralized autocratic rule. Despite the trappings of constitutional representative government, Mobutu continues to rule in a highly personal, authoritarian manner. Although he rules with an iron fist, he is not unduly cruel. He has shown some concern for the US position on human rights.

The forty-eight year old Mobutu has brought a modicum of stability to Zaire. The political and economic challenges that have beset the country could easily have overwhelmed half a dozen presidents with lesser staying power. Mobutu has attempted to create and maintain a sense of national unity in an undeveloped country the size of the US east of the Mississippi River, whose mostly illiterate 25 million inhabitants comprise over 200 tribes using 700 languages and dialects. He has survived Congolese blood politics and has repelled challenges over the years with little on his side except the army--the base of his power--and his own intelligence and craftiness.

After several years of apparent progress in political and economic development, conditions began deteriorating about four years ago with increasing speed. Economic reversals and the rekindling of the country's divisive ethnic and regional sentiments have combined to threaten Mobutu's rule and jeopardize Zaire's future. Some of the country's problems--such as the drastic fall in copper prices--have been beyond Mobutu's power to control.

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In viewing the country's rapid recovery shortly after Mobutu came to power, observers--perhaps including Mobutu himself--probably believed that a recurrence of the total chaos and rampant incoherence of the early 1960's would not be possible. If the present trends toward complete economic and political decay are not reversed, however, Mobutu's self-described "miracle" could end in the darkness in which it began. Mobutu is facing his most serious crisis as Zaire's "President-Founder."

Mobutu's economic and political problems have been brought to a head by the recent invasion of Shaba Region by ex-Katangan gendarmes. Shaba, formerly Katanga Province, is the richest of Zaire's nine regions, and without Shaba's wealth Zaire would not be a viable entity.

After the Congo's independence in 1960, secessionists proclaimed the short-lived Republic of Katanga and organized a 12,000-man police force. Several thousand of these ~~police~~ went into exile in Angola after Mobutu seized power. Recently, the term "Katangan" has been applied generally to anti-Mobutu exiles in Angola--including tribal relatives recruited by the original exiles, other political dissidents and military deserters from Zaire, and probably some vagrant Angolans. The Katangan leadership calls itself the Congolese National Liberation Front (FNLC). The Organization is led by "General" Nathaniel Mbumba, a Luanda tribesman from Shaba who fled to Angola in 1967. ~~FNLC~~ FNLC touts a socialist line, but rank and file members probably are primarily motivated by their opposition to Mobutu, an attitude exacerbated by traditional mistrust and by adverse personal or tribal experiences under Mobutu's rule. Shaba, and other Zairian regions, have legitimate grievances against ~~Mobutu's~~ ^{the} government. The residents of the aggrieved regions are not, however, particularly receptive to socialist ideology. The FNLC has representatives abroad and claims to have a wide range of support in Zaire that cuts across tribal and regional lines. The organization's basic support rests, however, with the Luanda tribesmen who reside in Shaba region and in contiguous parts of Angola and Zambia. The rebels acceptance of Angolan and Cuban support is probably a marriage of convenience. Other dissident groups exist, although they pose no great threat to Mobutu. The rising tide of popular discontent will probably increase, however.

Mobutu is Western-oriented and sees himself as a moderate elder statesman holding the line against Communist encroachment

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in Africa. He has maintained close relations with the US and receives US aid and some military assistance. Mobutu believes, however, that the West--mainly the US--is abandoning Zaire and other moderate African states. He is concerned and jealous that Nigeria may be replacing his country as Washington's major interest in Africa.

Last year in order to obtain foreign support to repulse an incursion of rebels into Shaba, Mobutu portrayed the attack as a massive foreign invasion led by Cubans. France mobilized a coalition of foreign supporters to intervene on Zaire's behalf. A similar scenario may be repeated this year. Unless he can obtain substantial foreign military and economic assistance, Mobutu may not survive.

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